

Greenwich



on the Creek

By

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Greenwich on the Creek

*"Like a dream within a dream
Comes the memory of a stream
Gliding like a gilded thought .
Through its marsh meads, and caught
Like a tired child after play,
To the bosom of the bay.
Backward from its reedy shores
Rows of ancient sycamores
Mix their boughs and interlace
In a slumbrous, fond embrace
Where the one wide street runs down
To the wharf at Greenwich town."*

It was around the wharf at "Greenwich town," at the end of the long street, that, much of the early life of the village revolved. Here could be found a tavern, the jail and the general store where the colonial farmers took their surplus butter, cheese and eggs to trade for those few things not grown or produced upon the home farm.

The following extract from the biography of a farm wife living near Greenwich about the Middle of the 18th century shows how nearly self-supporting these farms were: "With the exception of her husband's Sunday-coat, which was the one that had served at his wedding, and which lasted for a good part of after life, she had on hand the making of his and their children's garments from the flax and the wool. All the bedding and house linen must be made, and geese kept to find materials for beds; some thousand weight of cheese to be prepared annually for market; poultry and calves to be raised; gardening to be done; the work of butchering-time to be attended to (this included the putting up of pork and salt meat to last the whole year, besides sausages for winter, and the making of candles); herbs to be gathered and dried, and ointments compounded; besides all the ordinary house-work of washing, ironing, patching, darning, knitting, scrubbing, baking, cooking, and many other avocations, which a farmer's wife now-a-days would be apt to think entirely out of her line. And all this without any 'help,' other than that afforded by her own little daughters, as they became able."

In the tavern, no doubt, and upon the wharf in pleasant weather, men met and talked over the latest news and affairs of the day brought to them from many ports by

the vessels sailing up the crooked reaches of the Cohansey.

We can imagine the thrill that went through the village when a vessel was sighted coming up the creek and with it news from Philadelphia, Boston, New York and Charleston, and even far-off England. One, hopes too, that there were letters from distant friends and kinfolk.

It is a bit difficult to realize in this day of easy and quick communication that the people living in those early days in this little village along the Cohansey depended upon it as the medium for their knowledge of the outside world and for their touch with other people.

In the early days of history all traveling was by horse-back or by water, and in many ways the latter was more comfortable and more practical and frequently, while the "longest way round" was in reality the shortest way home.

The life of Greenwich virtually began at the creek. One of the provisions of the original concessions and agreements of the freeholders of West Jersey was that the streets in cities, towns and villages should not be under one hundred feet wide. And so in pursuance of this, John Fenwick, the Founder, decreed that here a "great street be laid out beginning at the creek" that the "first mile be one-hundred feet wide, the second, ninety and the third, eighty feet in width."

This long street extends from its source, the wharf, to the Presbyterian Church at Head-of-Greenwich and the essence of all the charm of this quiet little village is its wide and shaded street. During the summer months the "ancient elms and sycamores" still "mix their boughs and interlace" while against the winter sky they are silhouetted with a startling beauty.

And so, we may thank John Fenwick and those who, with beauty in their souls, planted our stately trees, for the quaint and quiet charm of "Greenwich town."

But let us return to the wharf with its tavern, jail and store—the latter was originally intended, some local historians have thought, for defense against real, or probable river pirates since when the building was razed a short time ago port-holes were discovered pointing directly down the 'reach' of the creek that flows past the wharf.

Greenwich was laid out to become the county seat. Quoting from Judge Elmer, "The act establishing the county provided that whenever the freeholders and justices should judge it necessary to build a courthouse and jail, an election to determine the place should be held at John Butler's in the town of Greenwich, on a day to be fixed by three of the justices, one of whom should be

of the quorum. It being the prerogative of the governor to appoint the time of holding the courts, he issued an ordinance directing them to be held in the meantime at Greenwich, four times a year. A small wooden jail was built in that place, and the courts were held for a time in the Presbyterian meeting-house and the tavern. In 1767 the townships of Greenwich and Stow Creek were authorized to have each a pair of stocks."

Traveling up the great street from the wharf one soon came to Market place, early established by the colonists, which was located near the site of the Tea Burning Monument.

Here, in accordance with an act of the Assembly of West Jersey in 1695, two fairs were "kept yearly in the town of Greenwich, located on or about Cohansey, *alias* Caesaria River." The first on the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth days of April and the second on the sixteenth and seventeenth of October. These fairs were continued and were largely attended, historians tell us, until 1765 when a law was enacted by the Assembly, this time to declare that "fairs in the town of Greenwich have been found inconvenient and unnecessary, and that therefore no fairs shall be hereafter held there."

The increase of regular retail stores whose proprietors were anxious to get rid of the trading carried on at the fairs may have influenced the Assembly. Greenwich was the place of most business, within the environs of the County up to the beginning of the nineteenth century. The stores here containing the largest assortment of goods. A young lady who visited Bridgeton in 1786, mentions in a journal which has been preserved, going to Greenwich "to get her broken watch crystal replaced, but the man had not received any from Philadelphia as he expected."

Wood and Sheppard's store transacted so large a business that bonds were printed payable to them.

Our little creek is an excellent harbor and from the beginning of Greenwich and for many years thereafter vessels traded direct with the West Indies and other foreign ports.

In 1701 a petition sent to the Crown by the Proprietors of East and West Jersey "prays that . . . the ports of Burlington and Greenwich in West Jersey may be established ports of those respective provinces forever." As the years passed and Philadelphia grew, the little port of Greenwich was forgotten.

A regular ferry was kept up over the river and there was much intercourse between the people of Fairfield and Greenwich.

As all who read this know, the high light in the story of our creek has been its part

in the events leading up to our Tea Party held upon the evening of Dec. 22, 1774!

Had the creek not been a good and safe harbor and with a little town and wharf along its banks, the *Greyhound* might have swung about and sailed elsewhere when her Captain was warned by a river pilot to not continue on his way to Philadelphia with his cargo of East India tea.

The story is so well known that it needs not to be told here except that no story of Greenwich is quite complete without it and we shall ask an unknown poet for the tale:

"On the wharf I sit and dream
While the stars throw many a beam—
Make a soft and silver streak
On the stillness of the creek;
And a vessel, through the haze
Of the old colonial days,
Like a spectre seems to ride
On the inward flowing tide;
Like a phantom it appears
Faintly through the many years
That have vanished since its sails
Braved the fierce Atlantic gales
Are they risen from the graves?
Those dark figures, clad as braves,
Of the dusky tribal hosts
That of old possessed these coasts?
Swift they glide from 'neath the trees,
The ill-fated stores to seize.
Noiselessly, with whispered jests,
High they heap the fragrant chests,
'Round the gnarled trunk that still
Lifts its limbs on yonder hill;
And, at once a ruddy blaze
Skyward leaps and madly plays,
Snapping, crackling o'er the pyre,
Till, with patriotic fire,
All that costly cargo, doomed,
Unto ashes is consumed!
Back the ship drifts through the haze,
And the figures with the blaze
Fade and vanish from the sight."

Almost two hundred years have gone since that stirring December night and the village of Greenwich still "pursues the even tenor of its way." Perhaps this is due in a measure to the quiet influence of the Old Meeting House near the wharf and of those 'placid Quaker couples' who so long ago,

"With broad-brimmed hats and bonnets gray
'Neath the branches wend their way
Toward the Meeting house that stands
Overlooking fertile land"

There is a tradition in the village that because of Quaker conservatism, no progress either commercially or industrially has been made—but there are those among us who feel that, lacking these, we have gained far more—the serenity of spirit, poise and

contentment that comes from living in a place of old-time charm and tradition.

"When at night the beacons glow,
Over tides that ebb and flow,
Over shoals of silver sand,
By the salt sea breezes fanned,
Pinning fast her sable gown
With a star above the town,
Darkness hovers—here and there,
Lighted by a casement square.
Then as the moon swells clear and
bright,
And all the heaven seems to fill,
As the orb's full-rounded girth
Like a bubble fills the earth;
Lo! the lamps, by twos and three,
Fade among the village trees—
From the narrow casements fade,
And the village with its green
Turned to blackness, sleeps
Beside the roadway running down
To the Wharf at Greenwich town."

Mrs. Robert Ewing

Bibliography—

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